

REVIEW.

Supernormal Faculties in Man: An Experimental Study by EUGENE OSTY. Translated from the French by STANLEY DE BRATH, M.I.C.E. (London: Methuen & Co. 1923. Pp. xi, 245. 15s. net.)

DR. OSTY is a French medical man who published in 1913 a work on *Lucidity and Intuition*, embodying what he had learnt by "three years' experimental study of the strange faculty possessed by certain persons of revealing the course of an individual life, and that without regard to the normal exercise of their intelligence, to information from their ordinary senses, and to the insuperable obstacles which time and space put in the way of our ordinary perception,"¹ and sums up his subsequent researches in the present book. These, he claims (p. vii), show that supernormal cognition is producible at will, independent of beliefs and faith in witnesses, and is susceptible of exact observation and indefinitely repeated experimentation.

It can hardly, however, be maintained that he succeeds in making good this very large claim. For, though his book is readable and full of interesting stories, and no one after reading it could doubt either his good faith, his ingenuity, or his enthusiasm, it is disappointing to find that his method of 'experimenting' is merely that of consulting the oracle of the professional *clairvoyants* who seem to abound in France, and recounting their successes with a considerable display of technical terminology. This method may be repeatable indefinitely, and even *ad nauseam*, but it hardly deserves to be called 'experiment' or even 'precise observation,' and correct

¹ Mr. de Brath translates "revealing the sequences of individual lives independently of normal intelligence, of normal sensorial information, and also of the unavoidable obstacles". . . , a rendering which reveals the chief defect of his translation. It is adequate, though not always accurate, in ordinary narrative (as when on p. 234 he translates 'gros' and 'mince' by 'big' and 'small'), but tends to become obscure in theoretical passages.

results are certainly not producible by it at will. Dr. Osty of course knows this as well as anyone; but it is only towards the end of the book, in a valuable chapter on 'errors in metagnomy' that one learns that errors abound and "pervade metagnomic séances in variable proportions.... Some séances contain scarcely any, others contain a few, others many" (p. 205), and that Dr. Osty, though he has had "ideally good séances," has never come across "an impeccable percipient" (p. 215). All are capable of starting off on a wrong clue, and incapable of distinguishing between a genuinely supernormal vision, an impression telepathically imbibed from another mind, and a product of the 'fabulation' of their own subconscious imagination. Moreover, their visions are always fragmentary, and therefore frequently misleading; and public séances, "or even private séances at which several persons are present" are conducive to error (p. 233). Yet it is evident that private sittings at which only one 'experimenter' is present, and has to record all that is said by both parties, are liable to errors of a different type: they can never inspire confidence like a sitting of which a contemporaneous *procès verbal* is extant. If in addition one recognises that every subject is different and has idiosyncrasies to be humoured, and that hardly a glimmer of a theoretic explanation of the facts alleged is in sight, it will not seem extravagant to say that we are still very far from being in a position to call supernormal cognition an experimental study reproducible at will.

True there remains a considerable body of evidence in its favour, which can hardly all be explained away. Nor need it be denied that Dr. Osty has materially added to it. But its quality is unsatisfactory and not always above suspicion, and, so far as it is fact, it is still uncomprehended fact. Only minute and co-operative study can be expected to yield the clues that will lead to explanations and to experimental control over it. And for this purpose it will be necessary to have more, and more complete, accounts of the exact proceedings at the sittings at which apparently supernormal knowledge is obtained. Dr. Osty (p. 239) regards these demands as unreasonable, and never gives a record of even one of his sittings in full, as a specimen of his procedure. The reader therefore has to take his accounts on trust, and cannot check his in-

ferences. His excuse is that the accumulation of mere observations without hypotheses is very slow work, and that such records are very dull reading. True, but the question is whether they are not scientifically necessary in the present state of the inquiry. They are at any rate more important than that every investigator should start afresh with a new terminology of his own, especially when it is incorrectly formed. For the term 'metagnomy' which Dr. Osty has adopted from Boirac should mean not 'beyond-intelligence' but '*after-judgment*' (or 'opinion'). Lack of agreement about terminology is one of the least of the difficulties of psychical research; but what is surprising is that the French students of these subjects, who are lacking neither in numbers, nor in enthusiasm, nor in ability and scientific repute, should not band themselves together into a Society like ours.

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